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St. Bartholomäus Church

Kissler + Effgen Architects

Cologne, Germany

Heaven and Earth: A firm turns a 1960s church into a place of final repose and, once again, worship.

By Mary Pepchinski

Dwindling congregations and shifting demographics have led to church closings throughout Germany, as elsewhere, in recent years. Yet some, such as Saint Bartholomäus, a Roman Catholic church in Cologne, are deconsecrated and repurposed as columbaria housing the ashes of the deceased. After it shut down in 2006, the congregation wanted Saint Bartholomäus's building to retain a sacred space to hold funeral services in addition to a de-sanctified area to house the urns. Because Catholic doctrine permits burial within church walls only for popes, emperors, and

archbishops, and it prohibits the celebration of the Mass in cemeteries, the task required the interior to be divided into two spaces, one sacred and the other secular.



PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

- **Urn cabinets:** Schlosserei and Metallbau Venino
- **Lighting:** Philips; Viabizzuno
- **Custom stained glass:** Giselbert Hoke
- **Bronze Mesh Curtain:** Alphamesh

(?specs=true)

Modernist Hans Schwippert designed St. Bartholomäus, a stark, brick-faced concrete cube, in 1960, and it was declared a historic monument in 1995. (Buildings can be landmarked in Germany after one generation, or roughly 30 years.) Located among multi-family housing and light industry near downtown Cologne, the abandoned church possessed, recalls architect Hans-Peter Kissler, “a dark interior with a graveyard quality that was perfect for this task. I only wanted to reinforce it.”

To define the sanctified area, he inserted into the church's center an architectural bronze mesh enclosure, measuring 23 by 33 feet in plan. The mesh stretches between a track in the floor and a rectangular frame located 33 feet above. Steel

bars secure the frame to the church's concrete ceiling beams. Adjustable LED luminaires, which are attached to the frame, shine on the mesh, wrapping the sacred area in an ethereal glow. Depending on their angle, the LEDs cause the mesh to appear either transparent or translucent. Furnishings include both new pieces (the bronze and steel pulpit and urn stand, the concrete altar) and recycled ones (the church's original pine benches).

Six-foot-high black-steel cabinets, which house the urns, form 10 alcoves around the sanctified area. The cabinets contain 1,600 niches for a total of 2,400 urns (800 in single and 1,600 in double compartments). After an urn is installed, a bronze plaque with a shelf for commemorative items seals the niche; a single light bulb, suspended from the ceiling, illuminates each alcove.

Other alterations draw attention to the church's religious art. Expressively carved figures, depicting the Stations of the Cross (1988) by sculptor Ludek Tichý, formerly located along the interior walls, now adorn the ends of the urn cabinets. Red spotlights accentuate the concrete ceiling and complement Giselbert Höke's stained-glass windows (1978) depicting the Resurrection.

To reduce costs, heating was eliminated, except in the vestibule on the west facade, which is newly equipped with offices and restrooms. The highly emotive quality of this church-cum-columbarium notwithstanding, a prolonged visit on a recent December midday left one with cold feet and a chill. Temperature aside, the dusky space feels welcoming and surprisingly uplifting. The urn cabinets seem to disappear into the shadows, in contrast to the sacred area's radiance, which beckons, like a clearing in a forest. Small, gleaming accents throughout—the suspended light bulbs in each alcove, the glinting bronze seals adorning the niches holding the urns—inject visual warmth and a sense of enchantment into this sober setting.

The dual areas—one sanctified, the other merely solemn—were intended to maintain the church's relevance and to ensure that a respectful consideration of death plays a role in the everyday life of

this urban neighborhood. This strategy is succeeding: “It is surprising,” notes columbarium administrator David Blumann, “how many people have come by just to take a look.”

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Size: 6,450 square feet

Construction Cost: \$1.2 million

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